BRITTLE BONES (Progress)

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KIRSTEN JANENE-NELSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

23 January, 2001

Christopher Hewitt
320 Clementina Street, No. 516
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Chris Hewitt:

I'm afraid it's taken me a bit long to get back to you about your submission. For that, my apologies. It seems running a small press on an even smaller staff can get the better of one.

It is with regret that I return this manuscript but, with few spots for future acquisitions, we are not in a position to take on such a work at present. I wish you well in finding the perfect publisher for your memoir.

Yours sincerely,

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Chris Hewitt

BRITTLE BONES

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Preface

What you will find in the ensuing pages is far from a conventional biography, beginning with birth and proceeding to the present; rather it is a collage of narrative poems and essays in which I have explored as honestly as I can the people, places and experiences which have shaped my life. I wrote often at random as ideas or sceneries presented themselves to me. Later I pieced them together to form what I hope is a complete self-portrait.

C. H., San Francisco
2000

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Brittle Bones

This is a ground-breaking book in more ways than one. First of all, it is, so far as is known, the first autobiography of a man with brittle bones; secondly, it is the first autobiography by a little man (that is, a man under four feet tall); finally, it is the first autobiography by a *gay* man in either category.

As Hewitt says, he is a minority within a minority within a minority. Furthermore, he is an "alien" and grew up in England, emigrating here in 1974. Yet this story can appeal to and engage all of us. It is Hewitt's honesty, directness, and sense of humor about himself and the world around him that keep us entranced.

This book is compelling reading for anyone, gay or straight, man or woman of any or every ethnic background. It's the humanity, the triumph of the human spirit when confronted with all manner of adversity that makes it so enthralling and inspiring to read. Though by no means a hero in his own eyes, in the reader's, Hewitt becomes one long before he (the reader) has turned the final page.

Sticks and Stones

Sticks and stones
May break my bones,
But names will
Never hurt me.

-Children's Rhyme

If you're in a wheelchair, non-disabled people seem to feel they can come up to you on the street, in the park, on a bus—just about anywhere—and comment about your appearance. It's as if the chair turns the person in it into an invulnerable, insensitive object with no feelings, no reactive normal human qualities.

Several times ushers in movie theatres have said to me, "You can't park in the aisle. You're a fire hazard!" Whenever I'm assaulted like this I am shocked, amused and angered all at once. I always think of a witty riposte minutes, hours or even days later. I might have told the usher, "Well, I may be a flaming queen but I'm not about to burn the house down!" Of course, anyone who makes an insensitive remark in the first place is not likely to get the joke.

Here in San Francisco I've been the recipient of more rude and obnoxious comments from straight than from gay people. Maybe gay people identify more easily with someone who represents another kind of minority. On the other hand, I have been harassed most relentlessly by African American school kids and teenagers. One kid, about fifteen, came up to me on Castro Street in the heart of gay San Francisco and said "Do me a favor willya?" "Sure", I replied. "Next Christmas tell Santa I want a new bicycle." I couldn't make sense of this at first. Later I realized he was addressing me as if I were one of the Santa's elves.

My very appearance on the sidewalk in Manhattan several times reduced a group of black schoolchildren to fits of hysterical falling-down laughter. They giggled convulsively, pointed and called out "Look at the midget! Look at the midget! That's the funniest thing I ever saw!" I'm not, strictly speaking, a dwarf or a midget and both words have negative connotations for me and probably for the reader. They both imply freak shows, circuses. They suggest that small people are cute little clowns. Again, I wish I could think of appropriate replies when I am accosted in this way. I'd like the kids to learn who and what I am, but on a noisy city street it would be hard to explain it to them; it's unlikely that they would even hear me over all their laughter and commotion. While kids, on the contrary, react timidly: They whisper among themselves and point at me. I might hear an occasional "midget" or "dwarf," but nothing more.

Adults can be equally rude. I was in line once for a movie in Manhattan when a gold-chain-bedecked young man turned to his girlfriend announced "I don't wanna go ta this movie theatre—crawlin' with midgets!" If I had the muscles of a wheelchair basketball player instead of brittle bones I might have answered, "That's right, Motherfucker. We midgets are taking over the world and our first priority is to exterminate big-mouthed assholes like you!" I didn't, of course, since I can't afford a broken jaw. Usually I just think to myself, "Wait till my friends hear this one!"

As if to prove that rudeness is not limited to any race or social class, I reminded of the time a dignified-looking elderly man approached me at intermission in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. His balding gray hair and well-tailored suit projected an air of Ivy League propriety—an impression he promptly blew by saying , "Well, you certainly got the short end of the stick, didn't you." I swallowed the urge to answer, "Shut up, baldy."

Though I don't like being patronized or pitied, I prefer it to outright mockery or hostility. One day in Woolworth's in Berkeley, a little old lady came up to me and said, "Let you out of the asylum for the day, have they dear?" All I could do in response was to stifle a laugh and duck down a side aisle. "That's right, lady," I wish I'd said I'll see you there later on!"

There's a related kind of patronizing that involves people talking over your head as if you're not sentient: Once, when I was in college in Birmingham, England and went to the local post office with two friends, the woman behind the counter looked at Sid and Pete, ignoring me totally, and said, "Taking him out for an airing, are you?" as if I were a piece of laundry! We all collapsed in a heap of laughter once we got out onto the sidewalk.

Patronizing can be more than verbal; it can take the form of unwanted assistance. Once I was sitting at the foot of a flight of steps when two guys appeared and without a word picked me up in my chair and carried me to the top. When I had recovered from my amazement I said, "Excuse me, I know you meant well, but I was only waiting for a friend. Would you please carry me back down now?"

I get around in a large motorized chair, about 150 pounds of hardware. Add my weight and the whole package amounts to more than 200 pounds. Sometimes I have had to argue fiercely with a would-be helper. I get the feeling that some men feel their manhood offended when I say, "It's much too heavy a load for one person. It takes three or four, at least." When a guy answers, "No problem, I'm strong," I want to say, "Listen, dear, I'm sure you go to the gym, but unless you're an Olympic weight lifter, you'll need some help." As a matter of fact I *have* said versions of this a few times, always causing offense, though once in a while I'm wrong in my estimation. Years ago when the elevator broke in my apartment building, two obese-looking guys insisted they could carry me up

a flight of stairs. To my surprise, they easily did the job of four easily. They turned out to be sumo wrestlers!

One real mystery, at least to me, is what makes people associate disability with panhandling or homelessness. When I lived in Manhattan, I began to think twice about loitering on the sidewalk for a minute or two for fear of having charity forced on me. I've had coins dropped in an empty coffee cup I was holding, and in one memorable incident a *full* cup. One time a nun thrust a fistful of bills at me. "The Lord wants you to have this twenty-five dollars." she insisted. For once I came back with a reply that pleased me: "Who am I to argue with the Lord?" Since I happened to be broke at the time and Sister looked implacable, I took the money. I managed to salve my conscience later on by using some of the cash to buy food for a man who really was homeless

In another crazy Manhattan encounter, I was wheeling down Broadway minding my own business when a man came up to me and said "I'd give you a quarter, but since you're so small, I'll give you a dime!" A second man overheard the remark and confronted the first: "What a terrible thing to say to the poor guy. It's bad enough he's a cripple. You don't have to add insult to misery." They went on arguing fiercely as folks do in New York, so I left them to get on with it and went about my business.

It is natural, I suppose, to be curious about me—I look very different from most folks, even from most other folks in. We people with *osteogenesis* tend to physically resemble one another not only in body but also in facial features. We tend to have large heads, deformed and prominent chest bones, large delicate and often quite beautiful hands.

Because of this similarity in general appearance, I've often been mistaken for someone else. Years ago the movie "Ship of Fools" prompted repeated demands of, "You're Michael Dunn, aren't you?" Lately, it's been the wondrously talented French

Jazz pianist Michel Petrucciani. Coming out of Carnegie Hall once, where I'd just bought tickets for a classical music concert, I was accosted by a woman in a mink coat with, "Oh no, I'm heartbroken! I missed you! I missed your concert!" When I explained that I was merely a relatively unknown poet, she said, "It's wonderful you're a poet though. I just *love* poetry!"

I wonder if anyone has ever approached Michel Petrucciani and offered, "I love your poetry." I guess I'm just not famous enough for any reciprocal mistaken identity.

Being a public person for all the wrong reasons is pretty tiring. If I'm going to be instantly recognizable I would like to be recognized for my own accomplishments, not for someone else's. I certainly don't want to be recognized as the Generic Cripple who gets a quarter splashed in his cup of coffee.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

Moonlight Sonata

Before going away to university I spent several weeks in a rehabilitation center for people with wheelchairs called the Marlborough Lodge, part of the Nuffield Orthopedic Hospital in Oxford. Here I was measured for a new (manual) wheelchair and provided with a tiny, single-passenger, three-wheeled fiberglass car that was thought to be just the thing for disabled drivers (and that nearly got me killed later on when I drove it on a busy motorway. I would need ramps so that I could get around the campus at Birmingham, it was decided, so the dimensions and angles were calculated for those, too. The Lodge was ahead of its time, with a staff of well-trained, dynamic and forward thinking physical and occupational therapists. They had a model kitchen with sinks, refrigerators and stoves that could be adjusted to the height you needed. The accommodation was quite un-hospital-like. There were two of us in each room. The nurses wore regular clothes instead of the starched white caps and aprons standard for nurses then, and they treated us like equals, never talking down to, or patronizing us. They were mostly stunning Scandinavian girls with blonde hair, blue eyes and freckled, tanned skin. I remember thinking that if I hadn't been "different," I would have fallen in love with one of them. Instead I fell for my room-mate Roger.

Roger was a quadriplegic from a tiny hamlet outside Norwich. He was a big burly guy with twinkly gray eyes and a devastating smile. We got onto the habit of talking late at night. The nurses spoiled us by bringing us late night snacks. These kept us awake till the early morning hours. One night I asked Roger how he became a quad. Roger was a birdwatcher. One day when he was on a birdwatching expedition with a friend, Roger spotted two Cardinals, a rare find in those parts apparently. He became so excited that he climbed a five-barred gate to get a better look at the birds with his

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binoculars. The wood of the gate must have been rotten and the gate gave way beneath him, throwing him onto his back in the grass. When he didn't get up right away his friend ran over and yelled at him "Stop fooling around, you idiot! Get up! Get up!" But Roger had broken his neck. He never walked again. Though paralyzed from the neck down, he could move his hands and arms heavily and with great effort, enough to push a wheelchair with large rubber knobs on the wheel-runs.

It was painful to watch this formerly athletic guy inching his way forward even across the smooth, level hospital floor. In those days I had full use of both arms and legs and could propel my manual chair at fast walking speed. It made me feel strangely manly. In this way I felt myself Roger's equal physically. I was able to balance his much larger size and potential strength with my speed and agility. I picked things up for him that he dropped; I sometimes cut his food for him before he ate.

I remember he had a special knife with a bow-shaped blade enabling him to rock it to and fro through a piece of food to cut it up, but sometimes it was so painful for me to watch him struggle that I would offer to help. Roger was not angry or bitter about his disability. Perhaps if he had been, things might have been better for him. He was the least macho straight man I've ever met. He had the dreamy gentleness of an artist.

Roger had only partial feeling in his upper body. He was the first man I ever touched—deliberately I mean. I plotted my act; I even rehearsed a tiny script in my head. One afternoon, I saw him reading a magazine in the dayroom. It was a hot, sunny day and he wore a short-sleeved shirt. I was attracted by his strong brown arms, covered with long, blond hairs. I took a deep breath (if I had been religious I would have prayed) and ran my finger up and down the length of his left forearm, which was relaxed on the armrest of his chair. "Can you feel me do that?" I asked him, according to the script I'd prepared. "Not really," he replied, giving me a sad half-smile and staring off into the

distance. So you could touch a man, a straight man even, and the world didn't collapse about your ears! He didn't seem to mind at all, nor did he seem surprised.

I knew my question had probably prompted him to think about the accident. When he smiled at me of course I wanted to put my head on his shoulder, hug him, tell him I loved him. Instead I decided to face the truth. I asked him if he had a girlfriend. He told me he had been engaged at the time of the accident but his fiancée never came to visit him in the hospital and he never heard from her again. "May she rot in hell," I thought but did not say. I never heard Roger say anything critical about anyone. I asked him if he'd had a girlfriend since the accident. One of the nurses at the Rehab he had been in had proposed to him but he had turned her down, he said, because he didn't want to be "a burden" to her. "But if she loved you—" I offered. "No," he sighed, "it's better this way." "But Roger, you'd never be a burden to anyone," I said. He shook his head and changed the subject. "Do you like classical music?" "Yes," I answered meekly. I was stunned by his tales of rejection. "How about a little Beethoven?" He pushed over to the record player and dexterously but very slowly and laboriously put the album on the turntable.

"Rubinstein!" he said, smiling at me; now I was totally in love. It was the Moonlight Sonata. We sat in silence while the music played—the whole side of the album in fact. Tears welled up in Roger's eyes. Was it the music or the accident, I wondered. I felt so helpless and angry—a whole flood of emotion overtook me. Now I know the feeling I had was one of compassion, of empathy; perhaps he knew I felt this even though I couldn't express it. Somehow, Beethoven did it for us. The music had begun to bond us together in a friendship that was to last for three years.

The slow movement at the beginning heightened the sadness I felt over Roger's fate, the rapid movement heightened the anger I felt at Fate, which had dealt him such a blow, the

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terrible irony that because of his pursuit of the beauty of the birds, life had lost its joy for him.

Later that day I felt immense gratitude for having grown up with a disability rather than having had to suffer one imposed traumatically on me. To me, being tiny, in a wheelchair with a brittle bone condition was, and still is, normal. I've never known, like Roger, the exhilaration of running across fields in the Spring in search of rare birds. I've been lucky; the "birds" have come to me, alighted on my chair, fed from my hand.
The next day they sent Roger back to his village in a truck with his brand new wheelchair and his own fiberglass car (he was never to use) in the back. I had a feeling as I waved him goodbye that I would never see him again.

We corresponded faithfully for three years. Gradually I was consumed by my studies and social life at the university. I had not written to him for three months when the news came. Roger's mother wrote to my mother so that my mother could break the news to me. My mother tearfully read the letter to me. Roger had had, like a lot of quads, severe bladder infections. His doctor had decided to perform a kidney bypass operation and catheterize him permanently to try to avoid future infections. Roger had died on the operating table. One sentence in his mother's letter haunts me to this day: "I can't help feeling he just gave up on life." She may have been over-psychologizing her son, but it felt true to me.

I of course felt horribly guilty for having stopped writing to Roger . If only I had told him that I loved him, told him not to give up. Now see my guilt as a natural part of my grieving, but also the height of arrogance. Possibly the surgeon made an error, or the infection had poisoned him; the whole thing taught me a lesson: for God's sake hold on

to your dear friends, keep in touch. It's a cruel world, cruel enough to kill dear Roger,
Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES/Moonlight Sonata

who, in his dense blue-ink handwriting, signed himself in every letter "Yours, always, Roger."

There have been times in the last three years since my stroke when I've felt like giving up; but Roger is one reason I don't. I feel him hovering about me sometimes, his hand on my shoulder whispering "How about a little Beethoven?" This book is partly dedicated to his memory; now you know why.

The Villain

You were the weather of my childhood, Daddy. I could tell by how hard you stamped into the gravel as you walked up the garden path to the back door the kind of mood you were in—loud and fast meant we were in for storms; gentle and slow, we were in for heavy rain—silence, brooding; moderate and regular (this was rare) meant there'd be a little sun—smiles and anecdotes from the office.

You had enough anger in you to machine-gun a room full of people to death. I once said to my mother, when I was about nine, that I was afraid you'd kill all of us. "Oh no, he's much more suicidal than he is homicidal," she said. She was right. She knew you well. She knew you before the storms, but she told me when you were courting her, you would snap at her for no apparent reason. She put this down to stress at work. She had no clue that she was marrying an alcoholic.

Of course drinking is only a symptom of deeper mental problems; in your case, your inability to deal with your anger. And no wonder you were angry. You couldn't become an engineer as you wished because your parents couldn't afford to send you to engineering school. Instead you got an accounting degree. You were brilliant at math but could never use your brilliance except to show off by getting right immediately the mind-blowing mental arithmetic questions on "The Twenty-Four Thousand Dollar Question" on TV. Stuck in a job you hated all your life was bad enough, but in the Air Force in World War II, six of your friends were shot down and killed. No wonder you drank to kill the pain, numb the anger—or try to.

In England much of the time, the skies are gray; it drizzles a light insistent rain, a relentless gloominess which describes you. When you entered the room, your gloominess dampened all of us. I thought I hated you as I hated that kind of weather. But it was

because I loved you so much that your moods hurt me so much—the sunshine was so short-lived and the rain so interminable. I wanted to help. I told jokes, did imitations, made you laugh. Nothing took the chip off your shoulder. But you are not the villain of this story, Daddy. The villains are alcoholism, the Depression and the War.

It's amazing to me now that you functioned as well as you did. You were never late for work, died owing no money and by sheer force of will, really, quit drinking two and a half years before you died. For a highly sensitive, brilliant man living in cruel times, you did remarkably well. I thought when you died the storms would stop; but I had nightmares about you for twenty years afterwards—you chased me with an axe, fired at me with a shotgun. You were the shadow at the window or under the door, the cause of terror from which I have been running for thirty years. Writing this, I can finally look you in the eyes, Daddy, and say, "I forgive you. I love you. Thank you for trying so hard to hold things together to keep the weather temperate *just* enough to give me enough peace and hope to study, do well at school, not go mad with grieving for you." If your spirit is hovering near as I write this, be a guardian angel for me, shed some sunlight on my lonely soul.

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Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

Song of the Man with Brittle Bones

I adore velveteen-covered chairs!
I sit on them whenever I can—
in second-hand shops,
friends' houses,
I stroke the dark red
cropped grass of them and
I feel safe.
Perhaps being in the womb
was like being in a
red velveteen cocoon:
safe and sound,
unhurt when I kicked against the sides,
unseen, not a cripple yet,
only a promise,
a hope,
striving for the light
of 1946.
It wasn't a difficult birth.
I looked normal,
so they did the normal thing:
they turned me upside down
and slapped me.
It wasn't until I had cried non-stop
for three weeks that they discovered
they had cracked both my arms
and both my legs.
They called them green stick fractures—
like the snapping of green bamboo
or a stick of celery.
I can't eat celery without shuddering;
and I worry for bamboo
bending fit to snap
in the wet southern winds,
the lashing of the unhelpful rain
that keeps me indoors.
I can't risk stepping on the pavement

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in rain. I could slip and crack a thigh.
Rain is as dangerous to me
as the doctor's hand
wet and fresh from my mother's vagina.
Red velveteen is dry
and firm. I'm wrong.
The womb is wet and shifting.
That's why I was safe there.
I get confused sometimes
as to what is safe,
what is kind to my eggshell body.
I'd be best off
swimming in a placid pool,
the soft shore
whispering from all sides:
"Listen to your mother, Christopher,
You're still mine
and you are a loving child."

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The Ladybug

"Ladybirds" we call them in England. When I was a child, I was taught, like you, to say the rhyme, "Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home./Your house is on fire and your children are gone," whenever I saw a ladybug and then to blow on her a puff of air to launch her on her journey. "She must be very sad with all her children gone," I said to my mother when I was five and a ladybug landed on my sleeve. "Well, she is," replied my mother, "but she'll be alright because she's moving on." "Where to?" I asked. "To a new life," said mother, "and besides she's brought you good luck. The greater the number of spots on her back, the more luck she brings." This one had twelve spots. I decided the ladybird was red because of the fire and the spots were cinders on her back. The deeper she had gone into the fire to look for her children, the braver she had been and the greater the number of cinders (and spots) on her back. It takes courage and luck to start a new life, make art.

After I left England, my mother bloomed. She made real friends for the first time since before her marriage and she has painted many tender watercolors and oils of landscapes and still lifes in delicate pastel shades so fresh and so subtle that people buy and savor them. Now she also teaches what she knows. She brings everyone good luck. At eighty she still drives herself to work every day and acts as a personal assistant to her old boss. She and I are often in touch.

We were lucky; we never lost each other. We both make art.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

The Angel In The Garden

When I was a child I spent long summer evenings in the garden. I would play with my Dinky toys (toy cars and trucks) delivering imaginary people to imaginary destinations. Much of the time I would stare dreamily at the flowers, watch the children passing by in little groups on their way home. I would sing to myself. I had a nice boy soprano voice.

Several times neighbors called my mother up to ask where the singing was coming from. When she told them they would ask what the tunes were. "Oh, he makes them up as he goes along," she'd tell them.

One neighbor said, "It sounds as if there were an angel in your garden." I made up symphonies, flute concertos, arias, imitating the music I heard on the Third Program, the classical music station on BBC radio. In my next life I'd like to be a composer. I won't get to be one this time around, but I try to sing through my poems, a voice heard somewhere in the garden of the world.

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Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

To A Young Man Playing the Virginals

Such a strong man
for such a delicate instrument!
I with my delicate bones
would be your virginals,
would be your Virgin Queen:
Oh, play upon my vertebrae
and down along my arms
and thighs
your major scale of love,
till with your lips
you bring me to a moan of love,
forever lingering,
forever dying
in the white flames of your hands.

(for Gilbert)

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Psychics

As a poet and a person with disabilities, I need all the encouragement and affirmation I can get. Being both physically fragile and financially precarious (I chose an impecunious profession), I am beset by fears about the future: will I end up in the street? Will I find an accessible apartment? Will my books ever be published? Will my bones heal right? Can I survive in a world that puts little store by poetry, which puts a person with disabilities on the outside of life?

My greatest fear has always been that I will be forever doomed to watch the world go by rather than be part of it, even though of course I am part of it and need to be a watcher of it in order to write about it. Psychics who claim to know one's future have often tempted me, though apart from the occasional nomadic fortune-teller, none has tempted me successfully, mainly because I can't afford to pay for their services. The best psychics, or rather those who have, by luck or intuition, foreseen my future, have done so *gratis*.

When I was three months old, my parents took me to London to see an orthopedic specialist on Harley Street which was then, and for all I know still is, where the most prestigious doctors in England practice. This specialist (whose name my mother can't remember) examined me thoroughly and announced, "This young man will lead a normal life. He will go to university. He will be a delight to you and all around him."

Though the last part remains to be seen (it's not for me to say), the doctor was right. I did go to university. I've led a "normal" life, given the severity of my disability. How he could tell that I was smart enough to grow up and get degrees, that I would lead a normal life, can only be explained, I think, by the fact that he must have had some kind of "psychic flash" when he saw me. I often bless this doctor (no doubt now long dead).

How his words have helped me through dark times. He was a true healer, dispensing words of comfort and reassurance to my parents and, via them, to me. My mother first told me about him when I was applying to university in 1966. His words encouraged me to persist, against all odds, with my application. Whenever I have doubted my ability to cope, to manage in the world, to lead a happy and fulfilled life, I think of the doctor, a specialist indeed.

When I was nine and on vacation with my parents and grandmother in the Devon fishing village where we went on holiday most of my youthful years, a stranger approached my stroller. "This young man will always have a lot of friends," he said. At that age I was touchy and self-conscious about my disability, I thought he was implying that I would have a lot of friends because people would feel sorry for me. Even if he had meant that, his words, well-intentioned, I'm sure, have proved to be true. My main gift, aside form being able to write well, has always been the ability to make friends.

I have overcome my shyness and self-consciousness and become open to others. Until recently, the "others" excluded people with disabilities, probably because I was afraid that if I mixed with other "crips," especially "queer crips," I would have to confront head-on my own disability, my own "differentness." I have never had a lover with a disability (physical, that is!) but I now have several disabled friends. Similarly, not until recently have I had friends who are people of color. For many years, I think, I was trying to "pass" as a regular white guy. But look at me! I'm about as regular as an iris or a Calla lily in the world of flowers, but a flower nonetheless, still opening, cautiously, my petals, one by one.

Under The Table

When I was eight I was assigned a new tutor. His name was Mr. Smart and I liked him right away. It wasn't until several months later that I realized I was also attracted to him. I wasn't quite sure about this so I decided I had to find a way to "prove" it to myself.

My daily hour-long lessons were at a small round gate-legged table in the lounge. I noticed that by about the middle of the lesson I would get an erection (I had no name for it then). I somehow knew at the back of my mind that this had something to do with the proximity of Mr. Smart, who was a tall, handsome man of about forty-five. He had large, beautiful hands; he dressed well, usually in a blue blazer, tie and gray flannel slacks. I was interested in his strong thighs and his crotch and I wanted to touch them but I knew that this was somehow "forbidden." I wasn't able to associate the desire to touch with attraction. Sex I knew was something men and women "did," but I was not aware at all that men could, or might want to, have sex with each other.

One morning, I was alone in the lounge. It was several hours before Mr. Smart was due to give me my lesson. I happened to glance at the table where we usually sat. I wondered if the simple act of leaning against the table during my lesson was giving me the erections and the whole thing had nothing to do with Mr. Smart. I climbed onto my chair and leaned against the table: nothing. I pressed myself again and again harder and harder against the edge of the table: still nothing. So it *was* Mr. Smart after all!

Later in the day when I had my lesson I got the hard-on much sooner than usual. Now that I realized he was the "cause," I became consciously excited by him. That night in bed I stroked my penis while I thought about Mr. Smart. Then I got scared: some sticky white fluid came out of the tip of my penis. I must be ill, I thought. On the other

hand, it felt so good. My penis shuddered in an odd way just before the white stuff came out.

The next day I asked my mother if the "sticky white stuff" coming out of my "wee-wee" meant that I was ill. She said that it was normal and offered no other explanation. I was relieved to know I wasn't ill and the next night I repeated the procedure with added enthusiasm.

I now began to let myself fantasize freely about Mr. Smart as I jerked off and each time I got the same wonderful, thrilling feeling. From then on I did this every night. Sometimes the white stuff came out, sometimes it didn't. Either way the orgasm (I didn't know there was a name for it then) felt wonderful. One day my mother told me "not to dirty the sheets." "I don't," I protested. "Yes, you do," she replied, blushing and walking away from me awkwardly. Her blush gave me the clue that she must have been referring to the white stuff. White stuff was nice and besides, it was white like the sheets. It seemed to me unjust that getting it on the sheets was wrong when the act of making it felt so good.

Not long after the incident with Mr. Smart and the table, I watched the broadcast of a famous European circus on B.B.C. TV. One of the acts was a pair of jugglers, a husband and wife. The woman was blonde, had very large breasts and wore only a bikini. Her husband, a stocky man of about forty wore a close-fitting sequin jacket and sported an impressive mustache.

The day after the show, Mr. Smart asked me whether I had seen the show, and in particular, the jugglers. When I said I had, he exclaimed, "Wasn't the woman in the bikini gorgeous!" "M'm," I replied. I was shocked: to me it was the man who was gorgeous, not the woman. On the one hand I was glad now that it was certain I preferred men to women; but for the first time, I felt the stab of pain which comes from the

recognition of the isolation of being gay in a straight world. I felt betrayed by Mr. Smart's liking the woman.

Mr. Smart, it turned out, liked women a little too much. Soon after this, he asked my mother if she would give him painting lessons. He suggested they go painting out of doors in the field next to his house. My mother refused. I asked her why and she said, "I don't think painting is what he has in mind." "What does he have in mind?" I asked. "Well, it isn't painting," she repeated cryptically.

It wasn't till I was an undergraduate that I realized Mr. Smart had "designs" on my mother. Not long after I went to university the scandal concerning Mr. Smart broke in the local papers. He had been discovered in Upton with a married woman by the woman's husband. What was even worse was that she had been prostituting herself to a number of men, several of whom, like Mr. Smart, were pillars of Upton social life. The husband filed for divorce, citing Mr. Smart as co-respondent. Poor Mr. Smart, who was a fine teacher and as such had an excellent reputation, was fired from his school. His wife left him, his life was in ruins.

About fifteen years after the scandal, when I was in graduate school, Mr. Smart asked my mother if he could have a chat with me on one of the days when I came home for the weekend. It was an awkward meeting. He must have known that I knew about the scandal. He looked old and worn. He wasn't very handsome anymore. The stress and age had taken their toll on his features: his face had many fresh wrinkles, he was thinner, he had a stoop and seemed shorter, his hair was gray. I was startled also by his strong Worcestershire accent; in those days, a strong regional accent labeled you working- or lower-middle-class. Somehow, because of his aristocratic bearing (as I had remembered it,) and the fact that I had worshipped him so much as a child, I expected him to have an upper-class or upper-middle-class accent.

Nowadays, I like to think that he might have sought help from a psychotherapist or a twelve-step group for sex addiction, but my mother tells me that compared to this country, England is still in the dark ages as far as psychological help is concerned. This is another main reason I stay in this country. I need all the head shrinkers I can get. The thought of anyone from Upton-on-Severn going to therapy is unthinkable. One's only recourse would be to see an expensive psychiatrist and get put on heavy medication. The very idea of a support group for sex addicts is unthinkable in such a small town. Being seen in the act of going to such a group even supposing there was one, would be enough of a scandal in itself.

In retrospect, I learned more than just academic subjects from Mr. Smart. I learned that recovery from a crisis, the "bottom" of an addiction, is possible. It's a shame Mr. Smart had to recover on his own. I'm lucky to have had so much help in an environment which supports the very idea of mental recovery from addiction. There are, I believe, twenty-two twelve-step programs, based on Alcoholics Anonymous, for recovery from addiction. My first addiction was to romance. This was triggered for the first time by an extraordinary man, one John Clapham, my high school German teacher.

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What Brains Are For

Even my head is brittle—
Sometimes it feels like an egg—
Soft-boiled with a crackable shell—
a dent or two
and the brains would spill out—
my precious brains
without which I used to be nothing
but which now I use to be
other than brainy—
I can think attractive,
I can talk sexy, flashing my lovely eyes
at a man and get his number,
better still, a wink
that says "You're cute."
and he's not editing;
he means all of me.

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Men in White Coats

My earliest memory is of myself at age three and a half, falling out of my cot and breaking my right femur (thigh bone). My father lifted me screaming in agony back onto the mattress of the cot and my father and Paul our German "helper" carried me on the mattress to our car. Why my parents didn't call an ambulance is a mystery to me. Probably, since I was in such pain, they thought it would be quicker to drive me to the hospital themselves.

In the parking lot of the emergency room entrance of Worcester Royal Infirmary I was transferred to a gurney and pushed into the children's orthopedic ward. As I was pulled through the clear plastic swing doors of the ward, I saw my father punch, or at least raise his fist, to a doctor screaming the words "Let me have my child!" He had just learned, as I did later, that it was the rule in that hospital that children were not allowed to see their parents while they (the children) were in the hospital. The rationale behind this, I was told by a nurse, was that the children "made too much fuss" when the parents left after a visit. I would be allowed to see my grandparents, I was told.

Blinded by tears, I got out the words "I don't want to see them," choking on my sobs. The rationale behind the grandparent policy was, I suppose, that the children did not create "such a fuss" when their grandparents left after a visit since the children were not so emotionally attached to their grandparents. I was nine weeks in the hospital without seeing my parents. Whenever I doubted in later years whether my father loved me (because of his abusive behavior), I would remember his punching the doctor. He didn't just love me, he loved me with a passion. The vision of my father's punching the doctor was also one of the "slides" in the show of my whole life passing before me.

I had one visit from my paternal grandparents. I refused to talk or look at them. I was angry because they were not my parents. In any case I hardly knew them as they lived far away in Lancashire. My only salvation in the hospital all those weeks came in the form of a motherly nurse from Wales who spent time with me every day. She taught me how to tell the time on her Mickey Mouse watch. When I went home I spoke with a Welsh accent and was disappointed whenever I looked at a watch or a clock because it didn't have Mickey Mouse on it.

Very little was known about O.I. in 1949. It was obvious to the doctors from my bowed legs that my limbs tended to bend and shorten in the process of healing. It was explained to me by a doctor, a man in a white coat, that they would have to break my left thigh bone and put it in a cast along with my right leg and put me in traction. The theory behind this was that both legs, though bent, would heal to the same length. As the doctor told me this, I was filled with a helpless and lonely terror. I wanted my mother's comfort, to tell me everything would be alright. I awoke next day from the anaesthetic facing white pillars—they were my legs strung up in traction; thus I remained for six weeks. To say I counted every day and hour till my release is putting it mildly.

Then, just before I was due to go home, "tragedy" struck again. A careless nurse, cutting the cast from my right leg dug the shears into my ankle. I had to have several stitches put in and was told I would have to be in the hospital another two and a half weeks so that the wound could heal. My hopes of going home dashed, I retreated into silence and depression. I think I stopped speaking to anyone, except the lovely Welsh nurse. As I write this my heart goes out to that little boy in that hospital bed. I have tears in my eyes. O.I. is a horrible powerful disease when treated competently but when treated by callous, cold-hearted doctors the psychological suffering is horrendous. If I had had

supportive doctors who said at least a few comforting words, I would have not been so terrorized. It's no wonder I have little respect for doctors as a group.

Shortly after my joyful return home I was happily playing with my mother in the hotel garden when suddenly I began to scream and yell at the top of my lungs. My mother could not understand what was the matter with me. I had caught sight of about twenty men in white coats getting out of a charter bus in the parking lot. Suddenly she realized that I had mistaken them for a herd of doctors "come to get me." It was in fact a men's bowling team (garden bowls) arriving to take afternoon tea! Even now, if I see someone in a white coat, I feel afraid. If my doctor, whom I trust, wears a white coat when I visit his surgery, I feel afraid and distrustful of him. Rarely have I experienced kindly treatment from a doctor.

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Wild Flowers

As far back as I can remember, I have experienced a profound sense of longing, a longing not, as a non-disabled person might predict, to be able-bodied or "whole" in the conventional sense, but a longing to connect with what I now know to be a kindred spirit, a fellow soul. Occasionally, I will connect with a friend or lover when discussing art, poetry, or life in general but what I mean is more mysterious than this and hard to explain. The longing I feel is to connect with my *own* soul, my Muse if you like. I recently had a passionate affair with a man, Allan, with whom I fell in love. I realized during the affair that the way I felt about Allan was *exactly* similar to that which occurs when I am about to write a poem. In the affair, my love was, to a large extent, unrequited. Therefore the longing was often painful. The longing I feel before a poem comes is painful until I write the poem. As the poem comes or, as I prefer to say, is "delivered by the Muse" to me, the longing ceases to be painful, and the love is returned, spawning the poem.

It scares me that if I was in love with someone who fully returned that love, I might no longer wish, or be able, to write. Perhaps this is the reason why poets tend to be loners. We *need* to feel incomplete and search for completion in the act of writing the poem. Once the poem is written and the resulting elation subsides, the longing returns. When it reaches a certain level of intensity, another poem may be spawned if I'm lucky. Sometimes poems come in clusters, often the longing returns with equal intensity. The excellence of the poem does not depend on the level of intensity. This is where I need to avail myself of what Hemingway called the writer's "built-in crap detector."

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Usually I know if the poem is going to be good, but occasionally I am so elated by the act of writing, of completion, that the feeling misleads me into thinking I have written a masterpiece. I can never be sure about this, of course. I know from experience I may be deceived, so I put the poem aside for a day or so. When I reread it I may be thrilled or disappointed dreadfully with the result. Sometimes, in other words, the spirit is willing but the mind is weak. Whatever the result, however, when I have finished the first draft of a poem, I feel whole, majestic, lofty, almost God-like! I wouldn't change places with anyone—genius poet or able-bodied athlete winning a race, anyone. This is how I know I have chosen the right profession.

When I was a child, this longing I'm speaking of took the form of daydreams of an almost trance-like state, often sparked by the beauty of something in the hotel garden, perhaps the bright pink of the ornamental cherry blossom against the clear blue summer sky. The first time I remember feeling this way was when I was about five. I was sitting on the lawn of the hotel and for some reason, hearing a birdcall perhaps, I looked up and caught sight of the tip of a Lombardy poplar tree shimmering above the roof of the house. I *felt* somehow that this was an important event in my life—what Joyce christened an "epiphany." For days I wondered why I kept thinking about that tree, that moment. I was puzzled because I had never been told that poplar trees were especially "lovely;" roses were lovely and flowering trees and shrubs were lovely, but not poplars. That day I learned, subconsciously, that not only conventionally beautiful things were lovely, but that something that struck *me* as beautiful could also spark an epiphany.

Not long after the happening with the poplar tree, I was asked to tea at my teacher's home, the vicarage. As I was eating a sandwich, I noticed one particular wild daffodil in a small bowl of them on the Vicar's desk. The "trumpet" of the flower had split open and

both halves had bent back to form two extra petals. I asked Mrs. Manthorpe what it was. "Oh, that's a freak," she said, dismissing it, offering no other explanation. I felt sorry for the freak daffodil; I felt an affinity for it. No one loved or paid attention to it except me, I thought. I felt like winking at it, but I knew that flowers couldn't see. I vowed to myself never in future to dismiss a flower that was in some way different, or a freak.

Another epiphany occurred at about this time, also concerning a flower. My maternal grandmother had green thumbs and prided herself on the Rhododendrons she tended in the garden. There was a special border devoted to them. One day she took me for a "walk" in my stroller round the garden. As we passed the Rhododendrons—red, purple and white blooms, some so heavy they bowed down low and touched the soil with their "cheeks," she asked me, "Which of these do you like the best?" I looked along the row and pointed to a tiny frail bush at the end; it had only two or three blooms of a mauvish color, with light yellow centers. This was clearly the best. "Oh, you don't like that one, that one's wild," she replied in the same dismissive way Mrs. Manthorpe had spoken of the freak daffodil.

I had had less trouble with Mrs. Manthorpe's opinion because the daffodil was, I agreed, not beautiful. But the wild Rhododendron I thought both beautiful and perfect. At this moment it occurred to me for the first time that a grownup could be wrong. This was very disturbing. I had learned an invaluable lesson for the artist-in-embryo: that beauty is subjective, that if something struck me as beautiful, then that was good enough. I can see that tiny bush to this day. Like me, it was tiny, different, "wild."

Many years later I was on an outing with my mother and an elderly neighbor in the Cotswolds. We were sightseeing in my mother's car and she was driving. We had just had a picnic lunch on a high moor overlooking the lovely countryside near Broodway. As

we descended the steep hill, the car's brakes failed, and we went hurtling at about sixty miles an hour towards a stone wall. By the wall the road turned sharply to the left. My mother gripped the wheel firmly and said over and over "It's going to be alright, it's going to be alright!" As we hurtled towards the wall I was sure we would all be killed instantly and I had the experience of my whole life flashing before me. This took the form of a rapid slide show in my mind's eye of what I now know to be the most significant events in my life (emotionally) up to that point, shown in chronological order. I also heard, or thought I heard, orchestral music playing and a voice, like my own, only deeper, saying the words "Your whole life's been a triumph, your whole life's been a tragedy." Thanks to my mother's *sang-froid* we rounded the corner on two wheels and the car shot into a field through a gate that, luckily for us, had been left open. The car stopped, leaving us shocked, but unhurt and relieved. Two of the slides in the "show in my mind's eye" were of the freak daffodil and the wild Rhododendron. I remember two others. One was of my father and the other was of a parade of men in white coats.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

What Reality

Our paths cross once a year
in a lobby, a green room,
a station; we are blushing and
shy as two teenagers.
We'll never be Involved
(We both have commitments elsewhere),
but always, after, in my heart's eye
I kiss with you the perfect kiss
under a dome of stars on a winter's night
somewhere in New England,
we are consumed with consummation.
We stop time.
The beauty of it is, I can have you
as often or as long as I like:
What reality is better than this?

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Sizing Things Up

Psychologically, I'm sure my size figures much more greatly in my make-up than I realize. I don't go around town thinking, "Gee, all these folks on the street, in the restaurant, at the movie are twice my size!" In fact I hardly ever think about it.

My first awareness that I wasn't growing like other children came about when I was six. I remember Hazel, my nanny, who looked after and played with me when my mother and grandmother and aunt were busy with their work in the hotel, took me for a "walk" one day in my stroller down to the village. We encountered a kindergarten class accompanied by their teacher walking up the hill from the village school. They were, I noted, all about the same size as I. Realizing by their babyish look and behavior that they were probably younger than I was, I fearfully asked Hazel how old they were. "Oh, about three or four," she replied.

This threw me into a state of great panic. Later on, in the evening, I asked my mother why I wasn't growing. Her reply was something like "Well, dear, don't worry if you don't grow to be as big as the other children are. Anyway it doesn't matter that you're disabled, because you're brilliant." I remember that she didn't look me in the eye when she said this but went on dusting the furniture. While I derived some pleasure from being told I was brilliant I also felt afraid and puzzled at the word "disabled," which I'd never heard my mother or anyone else use before.

In my case, I thought, perhaps this "curse" of being disabled was, indeed, counteracted by my "brilliance," so I accepted my mother's statement as a fact. Yet a part of me thought, "It *does* matter that I'm disabled."

Furthermore, I was puzzled. Why was being small a disability? The brittle bone condition I had was never explained to me, though I knew that I couldn't risk playing with other children because I might break something. If I saw children fall and get up

unharmed I was always amazed. I expected them to scream with pain as I would have done, with an ambulance and broken bones the natural outcome.

Even today when I see someone fall, then get up and go about their business unharmed I'm impressed. When I watch American football, or hockey and rugby players on TV in England, I fear for their safety: They *must* have broken bones every time they collide. Instead of thinking how weak my bones are, I think how strong theirs are. Generally I avoid comparing myself physically with others because I'm afraid I'd become filled with self-pity, feel totally inadequate and inferior. I've learned to switch off the impulse to compare that most people find natural.

Thanks to my loving and supportive mother, I was brought up to think I was "normal." The bad side to this was that I was brought up in denial of my disability. The good side was that I grew up not nearly as coddled and overprotected as many disabled children are. I was left to find out for myself my own limits. It must have been hard for my parents to know what to say to me about my disability so they chose to say nothing. My mother merely encouraged me to do what I could do to the best of my ability—this meant using my brain, my creativity.

I didn't go to school until I was eleven years old. When I was about five, the local education authority wanted me to go to a "special" school for disabled children. My parents, to my great relief, opposed the idea. In those days such schools were probably pretty bad, and in any case I didn't want to be around other kids, disabled or not. I preferred talking to and being around adults. I thought children were "silly." My parents never explained to me why I did not go to school with other children and I never asked. I was happy with my tutors and afraid of other children.

In lieu of my going to school the state paid for my tutors, afraid, I suppose, that I would get hurt in the rough-and-tumble of an ordinary school. Nowadays I probably would have gone to a school for gifted children and had a better time of it academically, but I don't regret my education. Those idyllic days doing my lessons with Miss Brettel in the hotel garden in the long summer days seem an enchanted time to me now. In fact they were enchanted.

Mrs. Manthorpe, the wife of the vicar, was my first tutor. I began with her at the age of four. She was an excellent teacher, trained, like my aunt, in the Froebel system. Friedrich Froebel, the German educator who created kindergartens, was one of the most influential educational reformers of the 19th century, and though I'm not clear about his method, whatever it was it worked for me. I was very bright and showed it at an early age. One of my earliest accomplishments, under the tutelage of my grandmother, was learning to spell "chrysanthemum" at the age of two and a half.

I could also say some things in German. A number of German prisoners of war were given work on local farms and we employed several at our hotel doing gardening and handiwork. One of them, Paul Kauf, took a particular fancy to me. He was the only man in my childhood who paid me any real attention on a regular basis or spent significant amounts of time with me. I adored him. I learned proudly to be able to say "Das ist das Pferd," "Das ist das Auto," and to distinguish between "gelb Auto" (yellow car) and "blau Auto" (blue car). Paul broke his back falling from a cherry tree while picking fruit at a nearby farm. He was in a cast but the doctor encouraged him to exercise. Leaning heavily on the handles of my push-chair, he would take me on long walks down the leafy country lanes when I was three or four years old. I could soon name all the animals and cars and farm implements in German. Paul planted a seed in me—a

love for languages. Without that early experience I might never have translated into English the poetry of the Austrians Georg Trakl and Thomas Bernhard.

At grammar school years later I learned and became highly proficient in French, passing A-level French and German at age twenty. I've always been a great mimic and I am musical by inclination, something I probably inherited from my maternal grandmother's (the Jones') side of the family. My aunt is a wonderful pianist and my great uncle Owen and several of my grandmother's other siblings were accomplished amateurs as well. I started learning piano at age twelve, but I was lazy. Swamped with academic homework at grammar school, I rarely practiced, preferring to learn by ear. I was a frustrating student for any music teacher, a bundle of unfulfilled potential. My feet, of course, couldn't reach the pedals, but I tried to compensate by holding down notes longer. In those days it had never occurred to anyone, least of all to me, that something might be rigged up so that I could reach the pedals. Many years later I had such a gizmo made for my old upright in San Francisco.

Because I know that having a musical ear has helped me be a better poet—my sense of rhythm and sound have come to me naturally as a result of my musical sense— I often wondered why I started piano lessons so late. I assumed that we never had a piano because there wasn't enough money to buy one, but later when I asked my mother, she said that as a small child I would scream with fright when I heard a piano's low notes, so the family thought I wouldn't like a piano. We had one at the hotel but it was sold with the house and a new one didn't appear until I asked for one later. Looking back, I realize I was and always have been very shy about asking for what I want directly and firmly. I wonder, is it because of my size?

The Lady in the Pink Pantsuit

Poetry is an esoteric art, appreciated in this country at least by only a few; just how few was brought home to me in no uncertain terms a couple of times when I was living in Iowa and attending the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. As a result of publishing my poem, "At the Beach, Venice, California," in a local newspaper, *The Des Moines Tribune*, I was invited to read my poems at the Iowa State Fair just outside Des Moines. One of the Fair's organizers—presumably a poetry buff—got the idea of staging a continuous poetry-a-thon. There were to be four of us, each reading in turn in quarter- hour stints for a period of three hours. The idea of poetry at a State Fair sounded incongruous to me, but then I told myself, "Don't be a snob. Remember the sixties, Poetry for the People and all that. After all, you're the one who is always saying you'd like to reach a wider audience. Here's your chance!"

First of all the weather was against me. It was one of those blistering hot Midwestern July days; in fact, the oversized temperature gauge showed "Fair: 104° F" as I passed the entrance in my taxi from the Greyhound station. Already sweating and worn out by a stifling and smelly three-hour bus ride, I was in no mood for further torment. But unknown poets such as I was then are rarely asked to read, so I went ahead despite my sense of foreboding and besides, they were paying me two hundred bucks and I needed the money. As arranged, I was met by a young woman called Cheryl, the organizer of the Poetry-a-thon, near the sign which read "Stock Car Racing this Way!"

This did not bode well. "How will the audience hear me above the noise of the Stock Car Racing?" I yelled a Cheryl. "Don't worry," she yelled back. "There's a good P.A. system up there." She pointed to the grass-covered mountain behind her. " I read up there?" I asked. "Yes," she said, "that's where the poets go." "Where will the audience

be?" I asked. "Below you," she replied. "Kind of like Moses and the tablets!" I joked. "What?" she yelled. "Like Moses—Oh, never mind."

By this time I was really nervous. "How do I get up there?" I asked. "Oh, that's why I brought Gary along." She pointed to the anemic-looking, scraggly-bearded, long-haired young man at her side. "This is Gary; he's your helper." "Nice to meet you," I said. "I hope you're strong," I said. "Yeah," he said in a surprisingly deep voice and flexed his biceps. "No problem, man." However, like most poet types, he was far from athletic, and the journey up the mountain was terrifying. I held on for dear life as Gary wheezed, grunted and stumbled crab-like up the slope, which was littered with potholes.

Halfway up we seemed to be heading for a sign that read, "Pig Show." Had my trusty helper misheard "Poetry" for "Pig?" I wondered. I expressed my concern about this, and Gary laughed: "Don't worry, that's where they put the poets—between the Pigs and the Stock Car Racing." "Oh," I said grimly. This did not bode well. Finally we arrived at a small table equipped with a microphone on a stand and a glass of water by now made lukewarm by the glaring sun. I reflected for a moment how, before I came to the Fair, I had imagined a large cool tent, planters of geraniums and neat rows of folding chairs facing the stage. "Well," I thought to myself, "this is Iowa!" I positioned myself in front of the table and looked out over the racetrack below; and then, as a light hot breeze blew up from my right, caught a nauseating whiff of pig shit.

Just then Cheryl arrived on the scene, breathless after her climb. "Where are the other poets?" I asked. "Oh, they didn't show," she replied. "I don't have enough poems to read for three hours," I said. "Just read the same ones over and over. No one will mind." "I will," I thought. "There's no audience," I said. "Don't worry." she said, "Once you

start reading, they will come." She was not, as you might think, parodying the much quoted "Build it and they will come," from the movie *Field of Dreams*. This came out twelve years later. So, wiping the sweat from my brow with a grubby Kleenex, I began reading "Venice Beach" poem to an empty field, or should I say, slope.

Two stanzas into the poem, I joyfully spied a group of people traipsing across my line of vision from the left to right. Disillusioned with the stock car racing presumably, they had decided to head for the pigs. They stared at me as I paused between stanzas. I looked at these folks quickly over the top of my sheaf of poems, which I held in my nervously shaking hand. There were about twenty people staring at me in wonder, like a herd of cows would survey a vagrant fox or a landlocked seagull. One, I noted, even had a straw dangling from his mouth. He also sported a straw hat and "granny glasses." "American Gothic lives," I thought. A woman climbed up towards me and bravely said, "What are you doing?" I was tempted to reply, "Beats me," but instead I replied truthfully, "Reading my poetry." "Oh," she said mournfully. Despite my best enunciation of one of my best poems, the crowd moved on, eyeing me suspiciously as they went; the pigs had won the day.

After I had read for two more quarter-hour stints to the empty slope below, I fgave up and Gary, digging in his heels and leaning backwards as he clung desperately to the handles of my chair, miraculously got me down the mountain. Maybe, I told myself, I had reached the woman who had asked the question. Perhaps when next she was in the Mall in Des Moines, she would wander into Walden's Books and pick out a copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets, which might change her life. She might even

start writing poems herself—one about stock cars, one about pigs, and maybe one about an English poet in a wheelchair she had seen reading his poems at the State Fair.

A slightly more encouraging event occurred later that same year (1980), also as a result of the publication of the "Venice Beach" poem. I was invited to read in a shopping mall in Cedar Rapids as part of the Very Special Arts Festival. At the time "very special" was one of the "in" PC euphemisms for "disabled." "Are you sure a shopping mall is the best place for an arts festival?" I asked one of the organizers on the phone. "Well," she replied, "we thought you'd all have a ready-made audience, especially on a Saturday afternoon when it's busy." "If you say so," I conceded. This time I was offered only a hundred bucks, but money is money, and I told myself, "Art for art's sake."

The organizers had set up a table with a microphone and stand positioned on kind of an off-ramp which led from one level of the mall to another. It overlooked a Florsheim shoe store and an "open air" McDonald's with several plastic tables and chairs arranged in a row. I found myself on strange balcony facing a totally deserted shoe store and McDonald's. Furious, I wheeled back to the head organizer, who was blind, and told him, "Nobody's there!" "There's plenty of people there," he replied. I was tempted to reply, "How would you know, you're blind," but thought better of it. "I'll be reading to no one," I said in exasperaion. Just then a young woman who had evidently overheard me, approached and said, "Don't worry, honey. I just danced to no one. This is when you show you're a trooper. Anyhow," she said, winking at me, "Remember the hundred bucks." I bust out laughing; at least I hadn't lost my sense of humor. And besides, I should give them their money's worth. And it's good to show the public what we "crips" can do.

So, like some rock singer, I manfully grabbed the microphone and began. No sooner had I started than the manager of the shoe store emerged and yelled up at me, "Are you some kind of Jesus freak or what?" "No," I answered, stifling a laugh," "I'm a poet." "A what?" he yelled. "A poet," I said firmly and then with more than a little pride and defiance, "I write poetry." "Oh, that," he said. Apparently placated, he withdrew into his empty store. Having read for about ten minutes out of the half hour I had been allotted, I noticed a couple sitting at one of the McDonald's tables—a lady in a pink pantsuit and a man in a plaid shirt and blue jeans, whose large red face emphasized a large double chin. As I continued reading, I noted that the couple, especially the woman, appeared to be listening to me.

After I had finished reading one poem the lady began to applaud vigorously, but then looked about her self-consciously. Seeing no one else applauding (there *was* no one else, except for her husband, who sat rock-like at her side), she stopped abruptly. I carried on for twenty minutes and then decided to give up. I had shown myself a "trooper," given the organizers their money's worth, so I ended with one of my best poems and turned toward the entrance to the mall, where the lady dancer had offered to meet me with her car for a ride to the bus station. A stony silence followed my final poem. Perhaps the angels who watch over unappreciated poets were sitting invisible at the vacant McDonald's tables and applauding silently, I thought.

Just then the lady in the pink pantsuit appeared. She had tears in her eyes. "That was the most beautiful thing I ever heard," she said. "Your poems are like—like music in words." I felt like hugging her. "Thank you," I said, "you've made my day." I had some spare copies of my poems, so I gave them to her. She insisted on my signing them. God bless you, lady in the pink pantsuit. Your response meant more to me than any

professor's praise, any poet's approbation. I had, it seemed, touched her profoundly. Her reaction was a powerful refutation of my snobbism, which had told me that no lady in a pink pantsuit with blow-dried hair in an Iowa shopping mall could appreciate poetry.

There are probably many more amateur poets among women than men. In my high school, I never dared to tell the other boys I wanted to be a poet; they would have called me a "faggot," which in my case turned out to be true. Many of our greatest poets have been gay, Walt Whitman being the greatest. Poems are written by sensitive people (of whatever sex), and appeal to the same sensitive types. Sadly, much contemporary poetry is hermetic and obscure, and I have spoken to many people, including friends, who find it inaccessible. I try in my work to be clear, complex maybe, but not obscure. T.S. Eliot may be complex but is to me not obscure. Despite his esoteric references, he appeals to the heart via his wonderful musical rhythms and cadences. Who, setting aside his or her fear and prejudices could fail to be moved by a reading of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" or "The Four Quarters?"

It wasn't until I got sober that I became truly in touch with my "feeling self." My poems written in sobriety are clearer, more accessible and appeal more to the heart of the reader; they are more open, because I am more open.. Just imagine, in Russia, poets read to audiences of thousands; they command the kind of attention rock stars have here. Unfortunately I'm not Russian; but my poetry is my life. It's what I do; and it's the ladies in the pink pantsuits, like the one in Cedar Rapids mall, who inspire me to go on.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

The Flying Womb

Several occupational therapists and doctors have remarked that my chair is several sizes too big for me. "I like it that way," I reply. "It gives me more protection." Like the massive American cars of the seventies, it is heavy and its large frame and solid build afford me a safety both physical and psychological.

It also has a low center of gravity. In 1993, I was hit by a car (traveling at about twenty miles an hour) which made a right turn across the street I was crossing in Manhattan (I had the right of way; it was a crosswalk and the light was in my favor); Miraculously, the chair did not tip over and I escaped with a sprained left hand.
My chair is dark like the womb. I recently had it "souped up" to go faster. I like to be able to accelerate quickly to avoid obstacles: people, dogs, bicycles, which may suddenly appear in my path. It's as if I'm in a "flying womb," perhaps safer, because in the womb I broke many bones and even in the chair last year when I had a *grand mal* seizure, I broke my right hip, my left femur and left ankle, though mercifully I was unconscious at the time and it wasn't until later when I came to in the emergency room that I experienced the agony no yell is loud enough to alleviate, no painkiller strong enough to obliterate, which is familiar to all O.I.s.

I know my chair cannot protect me from possible death or terrible maiming because I have O.I., but having the illusion of protection gives me sufficient comfort and confidence to go about my everyday life with very little fear. Of course the womb I am in has an open front —people and objects can fall on top of me. I keep alert; I am my own seeing-eye dog.

In dreams, I am never walking, I am always flying, or rather, floating at about most "walking people's" waist level, the level I am at in my motorized wheelchair. I first got

around in a motorized chair when I came to this country and began attending classes at U.C. Davis. These chairs are so sensitive that a slight touch on the joystick will zoom you forward at an alarming speed. I remember being terrified of driving off the sidewalk and plummeting into the gutter on campus when I first drove the chair.

Now I drive with confidence. The chair seems an extension of my body, a part of me. The walking people I know may greet me in the street, but often I don't acknowledge them because I am concentrating so hard, my eyes watching for every bump and crack in the sidewalk which, if I negotiate it badly, could tip me over and lead to many breaks, even death.

Driving the chair is an odd experience; on the one hand it's as serene as flying in a glider or a balloon, on the other as scary as driving a bumper car at breakneck speeds. If I'm in an angry mood, I wish I had a cow catcher on the front of the chair and could mow down pedestrians ahead of me, crush them, hear the snapping of their bones; then, I think, then they'd know what it's like to have brittle bones. Then they'd keep a safe distance from me, be more aware.

On the subway, walking people often act oblivious to the chair. I want to crush them, then they'd be aware, I snarl to myself. I feel a lot of frustration, but it isn't the frustration of a person who can't walk and who wants to walk. If I'm late for an appointment, I don't want to run to my destination; rather I'd prefer to fly — to circumnavigate traffic, people, buildings, trees. I have a wheelchair that travels as fast as I'd like but I'd like to be free of it also. It is an implied insult to my freedom and yet it gives me freedom; it is my friend and my enemy.

It can never compensate for my short, weak legs, for my tiny body. Sometimes when I am lying down and see the chair parked next to the bed I want to take an ax to it. I

envision a pile of twisted metal, snapped wheel-spokes, sagging slit tires gaping like the wounds of dead soldiers on the battlefield.

I am always moved by the sight of an empty wheelchair; I envision a miracle — some aged man or woman bent and trembling with a slow, progressive, terminal illness, leaping up healthy, middle-aged or young, flushed with life, not healed by any evangelist but by an act of God, the touch of an angel, an act of will on his or her own part; the empty chair looks forlorn to me, strangely hurt as if abandoned by a lover.

In Truman Capote's *Other Stories, Other Rooms,* Randolph says, and I paraphrase here, "All I ever wanted was to be held and told that everything will be alright." This is what my chair does for me. It holds me and tells me I'm okay, I can do anything anyone else can, go where they go, I can embrace the world, and yet be safe. Though I am not a lover of modern technology—for example, I would sooner write with a quill pen on parchment than on a computer—I am grateful I was born in the age of motorized chairs, for the inventions and designs, the mechanics who keep people like me moving outside when otherwise I would be stuck indoors, watching from the window, envying how "other people" live.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

Caregivers

You name it, they've done it. They have come to work for me drunk, stoned (even when sent by home healthcare agencies); they have stolen from me—everything from erasers to VCR's and TVs, even dealt drugs out of my apartment, giving out my number as a contact number; one even wanted to "sleep" with me, informing me that he was "very good;" the same guy gave me a case of scabies through skin contact when he was bathing me and then denied that he'd ever suffered from it.

The problem is that the agencies don't screen their workers properly; nor do they pay them enough. Eleven dollars and hour is not enough for this responsible job. Having been ripped off, deserted (without warning!), verbally abused and had my health endangered numerous times by people sent from the agencies, I often hire people and pay them "under the table," (when I can afford to). Most agencies will not find people to work for you at night, though some will hire them once you find them. The implication here is that all we crips should be good boys and girls and go to bed early and preferably stay home all day waiting for caregivers to come and take care of us.

I am usually out all day and not home before ten p.m., which is late by San Francisco standards. I refuse to alter my lifestyle simply to accommodate the whims of home healthcare agencies, and caregivers in general. An elderly acquaintance of mine who is blind and in a wheelchair has "resolved" his caregiver problems by hiring young men with whom he has sex on a regular basis. My friend is wealthy and has a penchant for Latino boys whom he claims are excellent (both in bed and out!).

This would not be my way—first of all I wouldn't wish to complicate the client/caregiver relationship by making it sexual,l and secondly, since I live on S.S.I., I don't have enough money to hire a callboy/caregiver. My duty to myself is to take care of myself by rejecting the unacceptable over and over until a good, reliable, kind, efficient and trustworthy caregiver comes along. It tends to be a transitional job for many people. Those who are mostly overqualified often quit and get a college degree, or go on to a fulltime job in another field.

So even when you get the perfect caregiver, like Lester Green, who worked for me for two years, you are always afraid he may leave for reasons of self-advancement. I'm always looking for new ones—especially backup and part-time. Give me a call. Age, race or looks irrelevant, but you must be able to lift all 80 lbs. of me, be punctual, honest, well-mannered, gentle, kind and efficient—that's not asking too much, is it?

No More Monica

"We were good at movies," you said,
winking at me the night we broke up.
What you meant was, we were good at
making out at the movies—lips splishing,
tongues spiraling into each other,
helter-skelter slick. It was just
foreplay. You didn't love me. You wanted
a mistress, you married devil; I was
your Monica Lewinsky.

Now I want a man who wants to
make love in broad daylight and
all the bones about it, likes to lie
naked on a park bench, so I can
lick him all over, doesn't care who sees.
A man who says, "Let them stare. Let
them stand in line to watch like a row
of flagpoles, shaking their dismayed
red-flag faces." I want a man who's
proud to be my lover, who can jump
on the back of my wheelchair like a
queer Charleton Heston and yell "Ben
Hur! Ben Hur! Ben Hur!" all the way
down Castro Street to the applause
of total strangers.

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Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

A Kiss From Pavarotti

My friend Reginaldo from Brazil was visiting me in Manhattan when we decided to go hear Pavarotti, the greatest voice of the century, sing at Avery Fisher Hall. We got stage seats—he only ones we could afford—knowing that even though the singer would have his back to us, we would still be able to hear quite clearly that magnificent (and loud!) voice.

As Pavarotti walked on stage, the floor bounced beneath us; I was reminded of the earthquakes in San Francisco. The singer was even bigger then than he is now (this was in the mid eighties). He turned to those of us on stage to sing his last aria, its name unknown to me, though announced by Pavarotti in Italian. It was a little-known piece, delicate and tender, a lullaby perhaps, quite unlike the usual *bravura* pieces for which he is famous.

As the singer clomped off stage to deafening cheers and thunderous applause, I bravely wheeled my chair forward in his path and handed him the red carnation I had brought. To my amazement he bent down and kissed the top of my head. He had that famous, radiant smile on his face. For a second I was struck with terror: if he slips and falls on top of me, I thought, I'll end up squashed flat, draped over my chair like one of Dali's "Soft Watches." At the moment of the kiss, the audience gasped and held their breath—perhaps they shared my fear. I thought their sigh sentimental and patronizing towards me; now I would be touched—it was just their natural response to a moment of connection between the great artist and a devoted member of his public, and of course between the largest and the smallest persons in that vast auditorium.

I love Pavarotti not just for his voice, but for his humility. I love that he has said to the audience on several occasions in response to an ovation: "Thank you for acknowledging all my hard work." When an audience applauds me after a reading, I feel

the same. The art is a gift, the craft requires hard work, faith and passion. Pavarotti and I both have big hearts which we lay bare in our work, hearts probably the same size, equal in passion at least.

I'll always remember that kiss; I like to think he'll always remember me and my carnation. I'll never be rich and famous—I chose the wrong profession for that! But like Pavarotti, I do know the glory of being able to move others deeply by the beauty I've created.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

Mightier than the Mouth

When I was drinking, I was what could be called a "mouth on wheels." I would "hold court" at the Café Flores in San Francisco in the late seventies. I was, by all accounts, very entertaining. I did impressions, told funny stories, often at other people's expense. The man I see now as the king (or should I say queen!) of the Café, was a frightened, lonely person, trying to deflect attention from his disability (and small stature) by being fabulously witty and brilliant (or so I thought).

I kept people always around me, but not too close, lest they should see any of the pain I felt inside, the pain that I was medicating with booze on a daily basis (often alone in a dingy bar in the Castro far from the café).

These days I talk a lot less. My goal is to write more than I speak, a tall order for a chatterbox like me. Thanks to being sober for many years, and practicing intensive meditation for several, I have calmed down a lot, slowed down and am able to reign in my compulsive showing off. (I am no longer a "rolling résumé.")

During my drinking years my poems were clever and abstract. I never talked about my feelings. I cringe now when I remember speaking of other disabled poets who wrote honestly about themselves as writing "sentimental, self-pitying crap." I speak more about myself with my pen these days than with my mouth and I use my résumé to get jobs rather than to impress friends and acquaintances.

However, occasionally I find myself slipping back into my old "queen of the café routine." Recently I went on two dates with two different guys. The first was a professional musician. Because I felt intimidated by his impressive array of degrees and talents I found myself doing my rolling résumé routine once again. I realized

afterwards that I had overwhelmed him with a torrent of words—all about me! Not surprisingly he expressed no desire to see me again.

The second date was with a meteorologist (a weatherman). Because he wasn't a fellow (implicitly rival) artist I didn't feel so intimidated by him as date number one; I had also learned from my experience on the previous date. I asked the weatherman questions about his career and he asked me questions about mine. I did not lapse into doing cruel (if accurate) impressions of some of today's well-known poets as I had with the musician. This second date was a mutual exchange. I had a better time than with date number one. The weatherman had a good time, too. In fact, he asked me out again; thus validating my new policy of self-restraint. Sometimes still, on a "contact high" from the other guests at a party, I can turn on the wit and funny stories, but now I can tell now when it's appropriate to play the entertainer.

I used to be a character who very little. Now I am less of a character, who writes a lot more. I try to put my complete and adequate gay self into my work. In public I no longer try to be the "guy you won't mind is disabled because he is such a card isn't he?"

I have learned from the overwhelmingly positive response to my new poems and the chapters of this book that have been published recently that I am respected more as a writer because I speak from the heart. Incidentally, I am loved by my good friends for being the real me and not just admired as an entertainer about whom they know nothing except that he's clever and witty. We can now take turns being the entertainer: "Tell me another one, willya?"

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES

Acting Out

I am a minority within a minority within a minority. I am disabled, gay and a "foreigner"—I grew up in England. I am just over three feet tall and have gotten around in a wheelchair since the age of nine. I was born with a brittle bone condition called *osteogenisis imperfecta.* I emigrated to the States in 1974 in order to go to graduate school at U.C. Davis, ostensibly to study for an M.A. in English. I had always wanted to write but hardly ever wrote—for one thing, writing about myself would mean revealing my true identity as a gay man, and I was still in the closet. At U.C. Davis I found I could actually get credit for writing poems, plays and stories—unthinkable in England, so I graduated with an M.A. in English with an emphasis on creative writing in 1976. Then I was accepted to the Creative Writing program at San Francisco State.

I moved to San Francisco—to the Castro—and came out. Visiting Davis after graduation I told an English friend there (I'll call her Judy) that I was gay. "Are you sure you're not doing this just to be fashionable?" she asked. I was deeply hurt. Being English of course I was quietly passive in my response and said through clenched teeth: "No, I've thought about it a great deal." I never spoke to her again. Thank God times have changed.

Now when I go back to England on vacation I see lots of obviously out gay men walking about the streets of London, some even holding hands. Nowadays I'm sure my friend would have responded more warmly to my declaration. When I went home in 1980 I told all my English friends from college I was gay; none were the least bit shocked or surprised; they even congratulated me for coming out. I've since learned that coming out is not just telling the whole world you're gay (though that's a fine, a courageous thing to do too), but it's acting "out"; that is, living a full life, a fulfilled life as a gay man— being yourself not just sexually but spiritually and intellectually as well.

So there I was in the Castro, the gay Mecca, surrounded by my every male fantasy. There was only one problem: I was terrified. I pretended I was having a great time but because of my disability and my repressive upbringing I was painfully shy around men, especially those to whom I was attracted. I found that having a drink or two, or three or four, gave me confidence. On January 1st, 1979, I decided I would hit the bars on Castro Street every night for six weeks and GET LAID. Well, I certainly took men home but they were usually drunks like me. By the time we got to my house we were usually too drunk to have sex and passed out on the bed like two beached whales. I'm convinced that this is why I am HIV negative today.

Though alcohol, ironically, may have saved my life, it could have killed me, too—many a time I crossed Market Street at Castro seeing four sets of traffic lights and weaving unsteadily through oncoming traffic in the wee hours of the morning. Someone once said that God looks after drunks and fools. This certainly seems to have been so in my case. I never had an accident though I did have several close calls. In the midst of my six-week drunken spree, I met Will, my first boyfriend, a handsome Southerner. He was and still is, as far as I know, a falling-down drunk and a taxi driver (a scary thought in itself!). Poor Will was impotent (probably due to alcohol abuse). That fact plus our mutually heavy boozing reduced what might have been a nice sex life to practically no sex. But I learned to sleep with a man night after night unafraid. We kissed and cuddled and fought horribly.

My drinking did not stop at the end of the six weeks; in fact it got worse. I kidded myself that I drank only to "keep up with Will." I began to hang out with drug dealers. I felt I was going downhill fast so I moved to Iowa to "clean up my act," leaving poor Will in the dust. I went to study at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of

Iowa. I started trying to control my drinking. I got some stable, normal-drinking friends. Then the unimaginable happened: I met a hunky young man ten years younger than I and we became lovers. Richard was not a drunk. He was emotionally stable. I took him hostage, however; I was possessive of my "prize." I had it in mind that he was my "one and only love" and that I'd never get another. I clung to him with a vengeance. Naturally he felt trapped and began to cheat on me. My drinking got worse again as I drowned sorrow and self pity in a sea of wine and Scotch.

In 1981 Richard graduated from the University and went home to Long Island, New York, to look after his dying father. I graduated shortly thereafter and moved to Manhattan to try to save our rocky relationship. I began to make scenes with him in bars and restaurants, telling him in no uncertain terms just how to run his life, how to get his act together when in fact his act was much more together than mine!

One night I got eighty-sixed from a bar for masturbating. A straight woman sitting next to me had, rightly, complained to the management. Since I was in a blackout at the time I had no memory of the incident and thought the management had invented the story as an excuse to throw me out. I told my friends that the bar was prejudiced against people in wheelchairs. (I couldn't accuse them of homophobia. It was a gay bar!)

Two nights later, after another blackout in which I made yet another scene with Richard in a restaurant, he walked out on me. The next day, hung over and in despair, I met a woman in a sidewalk café. I poured my heart out to her, told her I was worried about my drinking. She told me that she was a recovering alcoholic five years sober and went to a local support group and to therapy. The combination had, she said, kept her sober. She was on her way in fact to a meeting of her support group and asked me if I'd

like to go with her. To my amazement, I said, "Yes." I've been going to support groups and therapy ever since.

It's now been thirteen years since I drank any alcohol. I feel more "out" now than ever I did when drunk in the Castro fifteen years ago. Sober, I was a college professor in New York for ten years. In 1991 a TV producer heard me give a talk on my recovery from alcoholism. He asked me if I had ever acted. I said "No." (I thought of all the times I had drunkenly leaned over to my unfortunate "companion of the evening" and said, "You know, if I hadn't been disabled, I'd have been an actor." The reply was usually "So be an actor!" But then I'd say, "How many parts are there for a person like me?" "Write your own part," they'd say.)

he TV producer asked me if I had any material of my own I could perform. While at Iowa I had written a book of poems in the voice of Achille Emperaire, a little-known painter and lifelong friend of Paul Cezanne. Achille was a dead ringer for me and had the same brittle bone condition. The producer read the poems and loved them. I turned the book into a play and began to perform at friends' houses. When a friend, Michael Anthony Thomas, offered to direct the play, I was prompted to take acting lessons. I have since performed the play, now called *The Blaspheming Moon*, in colleges and small theaters up and down the Eastern Seaboard. My moment of triumph came at the Center Gallery in Albany, New York in 1991, where I received a standing ovation. The audience was mostly straight and conservative-seeming. It wasn't the ovation that made me proud, though that was very gratifying. It was the fact that, here I was, a gay disabled man from another country, a minority within a minority within a minority, playing a gay man on stage and being absolutely myself.

People who've never acted are under the illusion that a good actor learns to do a great job of *pretending* to be the character in question: this is not the case. When you're

fully in the role, you are absolutely *yourself*. You *are* the character *and* yourself at the same time. That's what happened that night in Albany. I was in touch not only with Achille, but with my inner spirit, my true, gay self—sober, happy, joyous and free. Whenever I feel down or sorry for myself, I look at the photo taken by my friend Barbara Landis just after I came off stage that night, and I feel proud, proud and very, very fortunate.

Chris Hewitt/BRITTLE BONES/Acting Outs

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Tenacity

Living with a severe disability is tough. Up until my first stroke five years ago, I also lived with the fear of further disabling illnesses or disabilities, blindness perhaps, or deafness. With the stroke some of those fears were realized: severe weakness and numbness on the left side of my body, loss of peripheral vision on the left side and short-term memory loss. Following the stroke, I experienced "a severe depressive episode with suicidal ideations" (the psychotherapist's description) which lasted eight months. Never before had I experienced such a feeling of despair. I became insomniac, "in love with my bed." This kind of depression is common after a stroke, caused partly by biochemical changes brought on by the stroke's trauma to the brain. I felt I would never climb out of this "black hole." I don't remember feeling as crazy as this before; it's possible that I had been this depressed in my drinking days, but then at least I had my buddy and best friend, alcohol, to numb the pain. I felt as if my life were over. But this time, thanks to my therapy sessions and my support groups, I did not return to drink.

Then a miracle happened. My friend Lance, a landscape gardener, called from San Francisco and invited me for Christmas week to stay with him and some friends in a cabin in the Sierra foothills. One of his friends and I took a shine to each other. While Lance was serving Christmas dinner Wolf and I made fast and furious love on the couch. What an appetizer! It's no wonder I developed a crush on the guy, but commonsense told me this was a holiday fling—he lived near the Mojave Desert, after all, and I was teaching in Manhattan—but I got such a high from the experience that my depression vanished! My doctors had tried me on Prozac and Zoloft, but neither had worked. Suddenly I felt attractive again. My life wasn't over. I began calling Wolf "Mr. Prozac." I realized that such an event would never happen to me in Manhattan. It wasn't just the

fling, it was the possibility of it. California seemed more than ever a place of recuperation, rejuvenation.

I had always wanted to return to California for good, but after Loma Prieta in '89 I was able to use the quake as an excuse for a whole bunch of other fears. When I got back to Manhattan after my tryst with Wolf, I became angrier and angrier. I was "let go" from my job at John Jay College, suddenly, with no warning. My monthly rent went up to $950 for one room. I woke up one day and thought, "If I stay here, I'll die." I prayed over the decision. It was hard to leave my dear friends. I still miss them, but not the craziness, stress and expense. I had some money in the bank. I moved—no job, no apartment, but three friends still here from twenty years ago.

I persuaded my mother—long distance, in England—that I was doing the right thing and I did do the right thing. Had I stayed in New York I know several things for sure: this book would never have been written, I would never have come out to my family, and I would never have worked to improve my diet and health. Friends warned me that there were no teaching jobs here in San Francisco, that it was almost as costly as Manhattan. But I had always tried to follow my heart. Plus it made sense: the weather is less extreme and the city is much better equipped for someone in a wheelchair, with curb cuts everywhere and accessible free transportation. And so I moved back. I found teaching jobs, albeit part-time. I began writing, making friends, putting down roots. I was not depressed. I was sober. Everything looked good.

Then in 1997 I had a grand mal seizure and a stroke. I broke my right hip, left femur and left ankle as a result, the doctors say, of my thrashing against the framework of my chair. Perhaps luckily (for my psychological health, anyway) neither the doctors nor I were aware of the stroke at first. We were so preoccupied managing the pain and healing the bones that we attributed my slow rehabilitation to the breaks. Only when I was up and

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about again in my chair did I realize that I was much weaker on my left side, that my memory was worse.

I am battling with depression again, though not the deep dark abyss I had fallen into in 1993. Now I am writing, teaching, making new friends. Where did I get this tenacity? This strength of spirit? I have to give my mother credit. I hear her voice at the back of my head saying, "You'll be alright. Go on, you can do it!"
But it's more than that. I love life, my life: people, colors, sounds, the bustle of the city, the beauty of the park, music at the symphony. I will not be deprived of any of it. When I left the hospital this last time I felt so grateful to be alive, to have all my senses intact—or most of them.

If I had been born in some impossibly impoverished place at the ends of the earth my parents might, out of desperation, have killed me at birth. Instead I was treated as "normal." While it is true that my disability was the "elephant in the living room," the inescapable reality that everyone conspired to ignore, better that than being overly pampered. I went to a regular grammar school, a regular university. Being treated as "regular" led, I think, to my coming to demand of life what other regular, smart, middle-class people demand—a good education, a vocation, relationships, sex, friends.
In fact, it has never occurred to me to settle for second best just because I have *osteogenesis imperfecta.* I have always done what I wanted, at least in adult life—write, teach, live in an intellectually stimulating place. Until I got sober, I felt driven. Now I feel led, perhaps by some kind of higher power which guides my instincts so as to put me in the right place, hence my move back to San Francisco in 1994.

Even when I was drinking my choices weren't all bad ones, though I certainly made them impulsively and didn't plan ahead. This often got me into scrapes financially and emotionally. I have always thought of myself as an optimist, had the feeling

everything would turn out all right. There were moments of despair this last time in the hospital, lying there in pain in a body cast. Unable to sleep, with the noise of demented old folks babbling in my ears, there seemed no end to the struggle. I felt as if I would never get out.

Last year, after my second stroke, I became severely depressed again, but this time I knew the signs, knew that it would pass. With the encouragement of my dear friends, most of them other recovering alcoholics, and my psychotherapist, I pulled through. I am still "gun shy." Every flashing light, I fear, announces another seizure or stroke, but hope has returned. I am writing this book. I am about to move into a new apartment. I still love my life.

Never for a moment do I wish I hadn't been born, though I often wish I didn't have O.I., especially when I have a fracture. But therein lies the paradox: Because I am not my bones, not brittle like them, they are dear to me. They are the flowers of my soul. I must care for them as one would a garden. Somehow, my strength comes from them. My hands, especially, give me pleasure. People say they are beautiful and, indeed, they are delicate, ethereal looking, almost flowerlike, violinist's hands, perhaps. One of them holds this pen. It presses the pen firmly on the paper. It writes on and on, with tenacity.

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THE LIFTING TEAM

Recently in the hospital,
and in great pain
from broken bones
after an accident,
I had to be lifted:
bed to gurney, gurney to
x-ray table (brutally hard) table to chair.

Each time they sent for the Lifting Team:
Solomon, built like a football-player with
a wide smile, and Merwin, smaller, agile,
a savvy bird. Each time Solomon would say,
(seeing the tenseness of fear on my face),
"Don't worry, you'll be alright."
Indeed, their arms held me in a firm cocoon,
I never felt the slightest pain.

When in death's last delirium,
I shall call on the Lifting Team.
They will arrive as angels at my bedside,
and Solomon will say, "Don't worry, you'll be alright."
And they will halt my ghastly nose-dive into hell,
and lift me up, up, high up
into the fields of stars.

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Brittle Bones, 2000 - 2001.

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